

THE DEATH OF STEPHEN

SCRIPTURE REFERENCE: ACTS 6:8-7:50



The gospel cannot be stopped by persecution.

The STORY

Pray with children to start class.

Teaching Points for Class Discussion:

Stephen is filled with the Spirit and with power. – Jesus said, “If they persecuted me, they will persecute you also.” Stephen, like Jesus, was spreading the gospel of the kingdom with power. The religious rulers were angered that the old covenant was being minimized for a new covenant of grace. They didn’t think it was right that their customs be replaced (Acts 6:14). However, they could not withstand Stephen’s wisdom and could not deny the power of God upon him.

They incited men to testify that Stephen was a blasphemer, just as they had done to Jesus. But Stephen was not afraid. The Spirit of God was upon him. Even those who sat in the council saw that his face “was like the face of an angel.”

Stephen rebukes the Jews for their unbelief. – The rulers of Israel had always rejected the plan of God, each step of the way. Stephen summarized the history of God’s dealing with Israel and ended with a stinging rebuke, accusing the present leaders of murdering Jesus, the Righteous One.

These men were not innocently unaware of the gospel or confused. They were actively opposing the work of God, just as leaders of Israel did when they turned away from God and when they killed the prophets. Then Stephen, with great courage, rebukes them for not keeping the law they are claiming to defend.

Stephen is stoned for his faith and the gospel is spread. – The Jews, along with the Jewish leaders, became very angry at Stephen’s vision of heaven. They took him out of the city and stoned him. Their anger spilled out toward other Christians. As a result of the persecution, the Christians in Jerusalem were scattered. At first that might seem like a defeat. But God had a plan. The Christians that were scattered began to preach the gospel in the surrounding countryside. The result was that many, who would not have otherwise heard the gospel, were saved. We are told of the results of this scattering in Acts 11:19-26: “A great many people were added to the Lord.”

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WHERE IS THE GOSPEL?

Please use the following comments connecting today's lesson to the Gospel to help inform your understanding and serve you by aiding your preparation for class. Remember, we want to do more than present disconnected Bible stories and lessons to our young children. We want them to understand how each story in the Bible plays a part in God's greater plan of redemption.

Stephen called Jesus the "Righteous One." The Righteous One means the only one who did what was right. The reason that Jesus can be called the Righteous One (Acts 7:52) is because he never sinned, not even once! Not only that, but Jesus obeyed all of God's laws. No one before Jesus and no one after Jesus can keep God's Law. The Bible tells us that there is no one who is good, not even one (Psalm 14:3 and Romans 3:10).

Because we have broken God's laws, like the Ten Commandments, we deserve the punishment of hell. Jesus died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sin. He lived a righteous life, obeying all the laws for us. Jesus took our sin and gives us his obedience so we can enter into heaven. He is the only Righteous One!

ON THE ROAD TO EMMANUS

Read the following Bible passage from the Old Testament. Use the following questions to help the children understand how this passage points to Christ in the New Testament.

Bible Passage: Isaiah 24:16

Connecting the passage to Christ:

Isaiah speaks of the Lord as "the Righteous One" to whom all the ends of the earth will sing "Glory." In Revelation 5:12-13 we read that every creature in heaven and on earth and under the earth and on the sea will sing glory and praise to the Lamb. Isaiah gives us a glimpse of that day.

When Stephen gave his defense, he called Jesus the "Righteous One" (Acts 7:52). This declaration enraged the crowd and led to the stoning of Stephen. Luke records that, at that moment, the heavens opened and Stephen himself saw the righteous Son of Man, the Righteous One.

Questions for reflection:

- Why is Jesus called the Righteous One? (Jesus never once committed sin. Jesus also kept the whole law.)
- Why was it so important that Jesus never sinned? (Perfect righteousness is what God requires. Jesus met that requirement for us. Only a sinless man could meet the standards of God's holiness for us.)

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SWORD BIBLE MEMORY

BE A DOER OF THE WORD

Take time during the class to review the SWORD Bible Memory verses with the class. Provide the opportunity for each child to recite the verses to an adult worker.

ACTIVITIES & OBJECT LESSONS

Use the following activities for practical application and discovery of this lesson. For the younger children, review the preschool questions and use them to help the children relate to the passage. For older children, ask them why they think this passage is in the Bible for us today. How is it supposed to affect our lives?

PERSECUTION MAKES MORE CONVERTS.

Supplies:

one ball of play dough
rolled into five balls

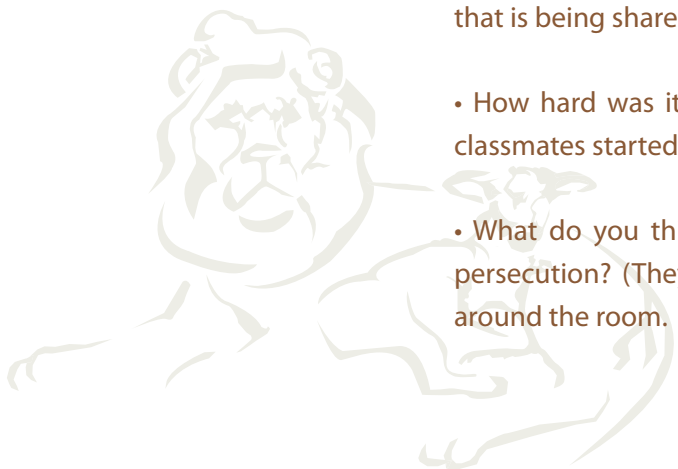
This exercise is designed to show how persecution spreads the message of the Gospel.

Assign two students to be Christians and two to be persecutors. Give the Christians each half of the play dough. Explain to them that they need to throw the dough back and forth to each other while the persecutors try to get it away from them.

Give it a try and see if the persecutors can get the dough. Then change the rules. Explain that once the persecution begins, they can throw the dough to others in the classroom who are not on either side. They don't have to throw all their dough at once and, if they throw a piece to anyone else in the classroom, they automatically become a Christian and enter the game.

The object is to demonstrate just how hard it is for the persecutors to stop a faith that is being shared with others.

- How hard was it for the persecutors to capture all the dough once the other classmates started into the game?
- What do you think was the result of the Christians being scattered after the persecution? (They spread the Gospel message just like the dough was spread around the room. Many were converted.)



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PERSECUTION SPREAD THE GOSPEL

Supplies:

- large bag of round plastic beads
- a glass bowl

The object of this lesson is to help demonstrate how the persecution and scattering of the Jewish Christians spread the Gospel.

Give each child one bead for each person in their family. Tell them to hold them.

Put the bowl in the center of the classroom and tell the class that it represents the church in Jerusalem. Have every other child walk up to the bowl and place their beads in the bowl. Explain to them that people would visit Jerusalem for the various religious feasts, get converted in Jerusalem, and then join the church there. That is what happened just after Pentecost.

The church in Jerusalem began to grow. The beads in the bowl represent this. The people in the surrounding territories, however, were not hearing the message of the Gospel.

Read the story of the stoning of Stephen and the resulting persecution to the class. When you get to Acts 8:1, hold the bowl up high, spill the beads onto the table, and let them roll. Have the children who are closest to the beads pick them up. Then have those who found a bead stand up. Tell the class the persecution spread Christians across the surrounding country.

Ask the class the following questions:

- What do you think the Christians who were scattered did? (They shared the Gospel with those they came in contact with.)
- How did God use the persecution to further His plan? (The Christians in Jerusalem were comfortable where they were. Though the enemy meant for the persecution to stop the Gospel, it actually caused it to spread.)



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THEY COULD KILL STEPHEN'S BODY, BUT NOT HIS SOUL

Supplies:

- large stone (the size of a brick)
- small drinking cups
- ping pong balls

The object of this exercise is to demonstrate the courage of Stephen. This courage came from Christ who lived inside of him. The Jews may have been able to kill his mortal body, but they could not damage his spirit.

Set the rock on a table. Then place seven small drinking cups on the stone, each marked with one of the letters that spell Stephen's name. Ask for volunteers to play the angry Jews who stoned Stephen. Tell them that they need to use the ping pong balls to knock over the cups.

Once they have knocked the cups down, tell them they have only destroyed Stephen's body. However, his soul, the rock, which is indwelt with the Spirit of Christ remains. Invite them to try and knock it off the table with the ping pong balls. They will, of course, not be able to do it.

Read through Acts 7:54-7:60 and ask the class how the illustration fits the story. (Stephen, even while he was being stoned, was a man filled with faith and even asked God to forgive the men who were stoning him. The men could kill Stephen's body, but could do nothing to his faith in Christ, his soul, or the Spirit of God who lived inside of him. In the same manner, the students could knock the cups off the table, but not the rock.)

Draw out the children about why a rock is a good representation for God's Spirit in us. (The rock is immovable, and Jesus is referred to as the rock in scripture. Also if any man builds his life on the rock, the storms, or difficulties in life, will not cause it to fall.)

PRAYER

Pick several children to pray based on the day's scripture passages.

IN CLASS PROJECT

Supplies:

pencil and paper

Draw a picture of Stephen praying to God while stones are flying at him in the air.

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FOR THE OLDER GRADES

COMPARE THE LIFE, TRIAL, AND JUDGMENT OF STEPHEN

Supplies:

paper and pencil

Compare the life, trial, and judgment of Stephen with the trial and judgment of the Lord.

Have the students look up the following verses and compare them.

Acts 6:8 - John 2:23

Acts 6:9-11 - Luke 20:19,20

Acts 6:12 - Mark 15:9-14

Acts 6:13 - Matthew 26:59,60

Acts 6:14 - Matthew 26:61

Acts 7:55-58 - Matthew 26:62-66

We are all to be willing to give our lives for Christ. Look up John 15:19-21. How did Stephen's persecution follow this prediction by Jesus? (Jesus knew the truth of the Gospel would offend some people and result in persecution. Jesus said, "If they persecute me, they will persecute you also." That is exactly what happened to Stephen. At a time when it might have been tempting for Stephen to ask why this was happening to him, Jesus already gave him the answer: "They will treat you this way because of my name, for they do not know the One who sent me.")

Though our lives may not be threatened for our faith in our country, we can still suffer persecution for our faith. How are young men and women persecuted for their faith by their peers? (Often those who do not believe make fun of those who do. They make fun of their passion in worship. Teens and young men and women who are not Christians can make fun of those who are obedient, calling them a "goody, goody," or other such slur. When Christians are ridiculed for their faith or righteous behavior, they are being persecuted.)

A LITTLE BIT MORE

Persecution – Stephen was the first Christian to be persecuted and killed for his faith. Before his conversion, Paul, formerly Saul, persecuted Christians to death (Acts 9:1). Jesus forecast the persecution in John 15:20. In John 16:2 Jesus told the disciples that those who kill them will think they are doing good or offering a service to God. Historically, persecution has strengthened the church. Persecution has weeded out those who are not true believers. Those who are faithful and stand strong in their faith have witnessed powerfully to the truth of Christianity.